

Ten Characteristics of a Good Teacher

BY PATRICIA MILLER

This article was first published in Volume 25, No. 1 (1987).

From time to time during the 15 years I have been working in the field of English language teaching and training, I have put myself in the position of language learner rather than teacher. In addition to enjoying language study and finding the process fascinating, I find it beneficial to view the process through the eyes of a student. Even though I have felt at odds with some teachers and their methods, I have learned something from every teacher I have ever had, even the worst of them.

The ten characteristics

There is a line in Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* that applies to any endeavor, but especially teaching. It reads: "That which is essential cannot be seen with the eye. Only with the heart can one know it rightly." The essence of teaching is difficult to qualify, but that line leads directly into my most essential criterion.

1. *I want a teacher who has a contagious enthusiasm for his teaching*—one who, as Richard Via says, loves his students and his work. Mr. Via is an educational specialist in using drama techniques to teach EFL at the East-West Center in Hawaii. I was fortunate enough to attend his teacher-training seminar in Korea in 1976. It was a pleasure to be in his audience. His enjoyment in transmitting knowledge and participating in the seminar was apparent and infectious. His passion for teaching instilled a passion for learning in all the participants. For me, the most crucial factors in effective teaching are who the teacher is and how he acts in the classroom. This influences the way the students react toward the target language and, therefore, their success in learning it.
2. *I want a teacher who is creative.* Teaching must be more than simply opening a book, doing exercises, and following an outline written by someone else. In the tedium of repetition, the student can go through the motions of doing the exercises without his mind being

engaged. What can a teacher do to engage the student's mind? There are a myriad of techniques that the creative teacher can employ—information-gap exercises, games, songs, jazz chants, problem solving, and other techniques that allow the student to utilize the skills he has already developed in his first language.

3. *I want a teacher who can add pace and humor to the class.* The humor of one of my teachers had the effect of alleviating my nervousness—of reducing my affective filter. There was a rapport among the students and the teacher because we were all laughing together. We had a good time learning, and we made a lot of progress because we were not afraid to make mistakes; we could take chances. As Krashen would say, the affective filters of the students were low, facilitating acquisition.

Another teacher that I had maintained an excellent pace in the class. She never lost an instant consulting a list or thinking about what to do next; she had prepared—that was evident—and she was going to capitalize on every second. I was somewhat nervous in her class, but I didn't have time to worry about it because events moved so quickly. I was literally sitting on the edge of my seat so that I wouldn't miss anything, and my adrenalin was a positive force.

I should add that humor is a double-edged sword: it can backfire, for what is funny to one person may not be funny to another. Humor across cultures can add a layer of difficulty to communication.

4. *I want a teacher who challenges me.* I had several teachers who always spoke to me in Spanish, both in and out of class. I felt they were showing confidence in me and challenging me to speak Spanish. The student's passive knowledge of the target language is always greater than his active knowledge. There is no reason why a teacher should use any language other than the target language except possibly for purposes of expediency. When a teacher reverts to the native language, he is showing a

lack of patience with the students' struggles in the target language. In addition, switching codes is confusing. I was given a test in which all the instructions were read to me in English, so that I would be sure to understand everything. Then I had to answer in Spanish. But the test had three parts and I had to continue switching codes back and forth from English to Spanish; I found this very confusing. It is like going off a diet—once you cheat a little, then you want to cheat a little more. If someone speaks to me in English, this activates my English channel and I am prepared to think in English. Speaking in the target language to the learner prepares and challenges him to speak in that language.

In addition, I want a teacher who can maintain a level of difficulty high enough to challenge me, but not so high as to discourage me.

5. *I want a teacher who is encouraging and patient, and who will not give up on me.* Some of the teachers that I have had demonstrated incredible patience with all of their students, never allowing even a shadow of displeasure to cross their faces in reaction to continued incorrect speaking after endless correction (which may say something about the policy of correction). When the teacher is positive—encouraging initial and repeated attempts—the students will apply themselves more diligently. Motivation thrives on success.

One teacher I had appeared on several occasions to give up on me. She would struggle to have the other members of the class repeat the combination of an indirect object pronoun followed by a direct object pronoun—the nemesis of the Spanish-language student. They would have numerous chances to supply the correct combination in various tenses, but I often was given only one opportunity. For the life of me, I do not know why the teacher gave me only one chance. Was it because I was struggling and she wanted to spare me any unpleasantness? Or was it because in her mind I didn't need the practice? I felt that I needed the practice and wanted at least a chance to try. I felt that the teacher was discouraged and had lost confidence in my ability to progress. As a result, I lost my incentive and became unsure of myself.

6. *I want a teacher who will take an interest in me as a person*—one who will try to discover discussion topics that interest me. When I was teaching, one of the first things I did was to try to find out what my students' interests were: hobbies, past employment, family, travel, etc. The easiest, most accessible area of conversation is oneself. The initial and intermediate stages of development for the language student do not abound with

opportunities for coherent self-expression. Most of the time, we language students feel fairly incompetent because we cannot express ourselves adequately, as we are accustomed to doing in our native language. Thus, if we can discuss some little accomplishment we've had, or something that we take pleasure in or are proud of, so much the better.

7. *I want a teacher who knows grammar well and who can explain something on the spot¹ if necessary.* I also want a teacher who is realistic and has the simple courage to admit that he doesn't know an answer if indeed he doesn't. I have had some teachers who, probably as the result of the de-emphasis on grammar explanation in the structuralist tradition, did not provide enough explanations. It seems to me that a more eclectic approach would take into consideration the needs of the adult learner, who should be given some insight into the intricacies of grammar.
8. *I want a teacher who will take a minute or two to answer a question after class, or who will take five minutes to correct something that I have done on my own.* I had several teachers who did this willingly and who encouraged the students to do extra work on their own. I also had a teacher who made some corrections for me at my request, but somehow I felt as if I had encroached on her time. Is teaching to be exactly 50 minutes of the hour and no more? First, we as teachers need to encourage students not only to study what is required, but to pursue on their own areas in which they are interested. Acquisition is facilitated when it concerns information that we need or are interested in. And second, we need to appreciate our students' efforts.
9. *I want a teacher who will treat me as a person, on an equal basis with all the members of the class, regardless of sex, marital status, race, or my future need for the language.* In some of my classes women were given discussion topics relating only to the home and family, and men were rarely asked to talk about their families. Men were also given more "talk" time than the women. This can be discouraging to the student, and that is not conducive to progress. As teachers, we must look carefully at our classes to be certain that we are including everyone equally. I know that I have probably been guilty of bias toward the brighter and more energetic students—they're more challenging for the teacher and more interesting for the class. But now

1. EDITOR'S NOTE: on the spot = without further consideration; at once; immediately.

that I have been a victim of bias myself, I will certainly be more aware of treating my students equally.

10. Finally, I want a teacher who will leave his emotional baggage outside the classroom. The classroom is a stage, and to be effective the teacher must in some cases be an actor. I do not want to interrupt my concentration by worrying about what might be bothering the teacher. Nor do I want a teacher who sustains himself through ridicule or sarcasm, playing havoc with the emotions of his students and thereby blocking any learning/acquisition that might take place.

Conclusion

The qualities that I have discussed can be separated into four areas—(1) affective characteristics, (2) skills, (3) classroom management techniques, and (4) academic knowledge:

Affective characteristics
enthusiasm
encouragement
humor
interest in the student
availability
mental health

Skills
creativity
challenge

Classroom Management
pace
fairness

Academic Knowledge
grammar

A teacher's effectiveness depends on his demonstration of the affective characteristics. These are inborn in some of us, but they are also within the grasp of most teachers. Most of us want to be encouraging, enthusiastic, and available, but we just have to be reminded once in a while. The classroom management techniques of peace and fairness are often overlooked, but they can be crucial to effective teaching. These are not techniques that require training, but again, simply awareness. The specific teaching skills of creativity and challenge are associated more with the types of materials and activities, and their level and appropriateness. Ease and facility in these two areas come with experience and familiarity with the syllabus and materials. Lastly, a teacher who knows his grammar gives himself credibility and stature in the eyes of his students. With a little training in how to explain grammar and how to teach it, teachers have an indispensable tool.